By Susan Harlan, USA TODAY

didn't want the Japanese government to know about the base, because they would have been very upset at the notion that the USA had an intelligence base so close to Russia. The base is so secret that it didn't have its own means of communicating with anybody, because if you have communications, the Japanese and the Russians would have found out about it.

USA TODAY: Then how did Project CLEF finally get the word to Washington?

HERSH: They overheard a Russian say, "I've shot a missile," and they were forced to make a telephone call to the major intelligence base in Japan, the U.S. base known as Misawa. They also were forced to send by airplane, instead of relaying the tape electronically, the information they had. So it took two or four hours for the basic first intelligence to get handled and processed. By that time, there was no chance to warn anybody.

USA TODAY: What if a Soviet plane strayed over the USA, perhaps close to sensitive installations or the White House? Would we have shot it down?

HERSH: It would have had to have been very special circumstances. Once or twice a year, the Soviet Union will move a lot of planes off our eastern coast — a convoy of what they call their "Bear bombers." If one of those Russian planes, which are intently being tracked, suddenly turned and began barreling as fast as it could go toward Washington, there'd be a lot of flapping, and it might not make it.

USA TODAY: Despite this additional information, the Reagan administration has not yet amended its initial account of the shooting down of KAL Flight 007, has it?

HERSH: Nope. They have yet to publicly say that they made a mistake, and that the Soviet Union had not deliberately shot it down.

USA TODAY: And the Soviets haven't recanted their spy plane claims, have they?

HERSH: No. The two sides are still talking past one another.

USA TODAY: What would this mean if we were facing a nuclear square-off?

HERSH: That's the point. If neither side is willing to bend and tell the truth, even when confronted with it, where are you? What do you think is going to happen if we have 12 minutes in which to respond to something in the air? Suppose something gets launched, and we tell the Russians, "Don't worry about it. It was just a mistake. We're going to call it back." Are they going to believe us? It would be terribly important for the president, or the administration in some way, even now, to set the record straight.

USA TODAY: What has the 007 issue done for U.S.-Soviet relations?

HERSH: Nothing good. Made it much worse. Lack of trust. There are other issues, obviously, but it's left a residue, a bad taste, and the bad taste is simply this: That in a crisis, when both sides have to talk very straight to each other — and in 10 years we may be back-to-back against nuclear bombs from the Third World — we better be able to say something to the Russians and have them believe us. And at this point, I can't be sure we would be believed.

USA TODAY: What can we do to avoid that scenario?

HERSH: We could maybe not listen to people like Casey who say we shouldn't talk so much about these things. I happen to believe sunlight is a great disinfectant, as former Supreme Court Associate Justice Brandeis once said. So the thing to do is — within national security limits and paying attention that we don't jeopardize our ability to collect intelligence — we can point out what went wrong and make people more sensitive about it in the future. If we can get somebody to think twice before he shoots off his mouth about what happened 15,000 miles away in the middle of the night, we might be better off.